



Story available at <http://www.billingsgazette.net/articles/2006/06/10/news/state/30-bison.txt>

Published on Saturday, June 10, 2006.  
Last modified on 6/10/2006 at 12:43 am

## Governor's bison ideas irk ranchers

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If Montana continues its current approach to bison that leave Yellowstone National Park, eventually brucellosis will be transmitted to cattle, according to Gov. Brian Schweitzer.

"I don't want to be the governor of Montana when we lose our brucellosis-free status," Schweitzer said.

He traveled to Miles City on Thursday to speak at the mid-year meeting of the Montana Stockgrowers Association to float his idea for fixing the problem: Pay ranchers to remove cattle from the area just outside the park, don't allow bison to wander any farther than they already do and expand the annual bison hunt to keep the numbers in check.

The first step is acknowledging that the current plan, which relies on hazing and sometimes killing bison that leave Yellowstone in the winter, isn't a long-term solution to keeping the disease from spreading to Montana cattle, he said.

Already, Wyoming and Idaho have been stripped of their brucellosis-free status, which means millions of dollars will have to be spent for extra testing and other steps before cattle can be exported.

Montana should take steps, beyond what's happening now, to make sure the disease doesn't hit cattle outside the park's western and northern borders and put an extra squeeze on the entire state's cattle industry, he said.

"My point is: Why should we risk 2 million head of cattle for a very small area?" Schweitzer said in a telephone interview after the meeting in Miles City.

"We'd prefer to eliminate the disease rather than the cattle (from the grazing areas)," said Bill Donald, president of the MSGA. In a phone interview from Miles City on Friday, he said the landowners adjacent to the park are opposed to selling their grazing rights.

"We were looking at having the Interior Department, Agriculture Department and the states of Idaho, Wyoming and Montana reach a memorandum of understanding to work to eliminate the disease in the bison," Donald said.

He added that Schweitzer was still willing to have bison hazed back into the park in the spring

so that no bison cows had their calves outside the park.

Donald said the MSGA passed a resolution opposed to eliminating the cattle for grazing near the park. The group endorsed expanded bison hunting as a secondary management tool he said.

Montana reactivated its bison hunting plan this past year, distributing 50 permits to hunters. The Montana Fish Wildlife and Parks Commission is considering expanding the bison hunting to 100 or more this year.

"The governor issued an invitation for us to keep working on it," Donald said. "We appreciate that."

Nearly every winter, bison leave Yellowstone in search of food and lower elevations. A state and federal plan approved in 2000 allows bison to be pushed back into the park and, in some cases, captured and sent to slaughter.

The plan is designed to reduce the risk of transmitting brucellosis, which can cause abortions and other problems, from bison to cows. Although there is no documented case of bison transmitting brucellosis to cattle in the wild, controlled studies have shown it is possible.

This winter, more than 900 bison were captured on Yellowstone's northern edge, and about 850 were sent to slaughter. Some 300 were caught and released later in the spring.

Schweitzer said the federal government spends about \$750,000 a year managing bison that wander out of Yellowstone.

He's proposing that money could be used to pay property owners not to run cattle on the land where bison go each year. An expanded bison hunt could reduce the population, and natural, geographic "choke points" could keep the animals from moving too far, he said.

"I am not proposing to increase these zones, which buffalo would be allowed to roam," Schweitzer said.

He has also suggested that a quarantine area could be set up for cattle outside Gardiner where cows would have to be tested for the disease as they enter and as they leave and would not be used for breeding in Montana or any other state.

This proposal is similar to a resolution passed in March by the Western States Livestock Health Association, which stated, "When co-mingling cannot be avoided, the Western States Livestock Health Association strongly supports quarantine of the exposed cattle herd until herd testing and epidemiological investigation indicates the herd presents no evidence of brucellosis infection."

The association added that if its recommendations are not implemented, it may consider additional requirements and sanctions upon the Greater Yellowstone Area states, i.e. Montana, Wyoming and Idaho.